

Ancestor Worship and the Challenges it poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry

BY

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This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to God who in Christ opened His heart to me and my family, who allowed me to study in South Africa and who sustained me through his Spirit.

Secondly, this study is dedicated to my wife, Ho Sun Kang, my parents, Yo Han Bae and Soon Gil Lee, and my children, Ki Ju and Hee Ju, who supported me during all this time.

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Preface

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ABBREVIATIONS

There are numerous abbreviations used in this study, most notably the following:

ATR: African Traditional Religion

AIC: African Independent Churches

JEM: Japan Evangelical Mission

JIC: Japanese Independent Churches

RCC: Roman Catholic Church

KEY TERMS

Accommodation	Dead, The	Shamanism
Afterlife	Death	Shintoism
Ancestor	Idolatry	Spiritism
Ancestor Christology	Inculturation	Syncretism
Animism	Mediator	Veneration
Confucianism	Rituals	Worship
Contextualisation	Sacrifice	
Cult	Saints	

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SUMMARY

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DEGREE: PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR (PhD)

Ancestor worship is conceived by some to be an outdated primitive custom with no relevance to modern society. However, this study shows that ancestor worship is still alive and well in numerous cultures and countries around the globe and that it is still practised in different forms today.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of ancestor worship in Africa, Japan and Korea and specifically deals with the challenges it has posed to Christian missionaries in these contexts. Furthermore, this study examines the strategies which the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church and Independent Churches have adopted to deal with this problem and the apparent mismatch with Christian theology. Therefore, the analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship is situated in the socio-cultural and religious paradigms of each of these countries and is examined in theological, missiological and Biblical terms.

Most notably, the thesis attempts to determine whether or not ancestor worship can be considered to be a purely social and cultural phenomenon which carries certain ethical responsibilities in these cultures and whether or not it is congruent with Christian theology. This study has attempted to prove that in spite of the socio-cultural dimensions of ancestor worship and its rituals (with their ensuing ethical responsibilities in the cosmologies of these nations) it is still essentially worship. It is contended that ancestor worship is fundamentally a form of idolatry and contrary to the teachings of the Bible and is therefore does not articulate with Christian theology. The fundamental premise underlying the study is the ultimate authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God.

This is a qualitative study which attempts to explore the phenomenon and rituals of ancestor worship on numerous levels. In each case the theological contributions of scholars in the field are evaluated and explored and ultimately benchmarked against the Biblical evidence. In the African context it is necessary therefore to look at African Christology and the attempts of scholars to contextualise the gospel in African terms.

As such the continuity and discontinuity between traditional religion and the Bible is explored and the dangers of syncretism are addressed. The ultimate goal was to suggest a suitable approach for the Church to deal with the challenges which ancestor worship poses in these specific contexts. The study will motivate and argue for contextualisation as an appropriate mission principle in this regard. This takes into consideration the social responsibility which missionaries have towards the people to whom they introduce the gospel. The reason is that the close bond which exists between identity, culture and religion is acknowledged. If the religion or cultural practises are rejected because it does not comply with the Gospel's requirements, then missionaries need to be sensitive to the void which they may create in the identity of the people and take appropriate steps to ameliorate the problem and avoid syncretism.